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ABSTRACT

Changes in American society and education over the last 20 years have contributed to the popularity of all-day, every-day kindergarten programs. Full-day kindergarten is popular for a number of reasons. Full-day programs eliminate the need to provide buses and crossing guards at mid-day. In high-poverty schools, state and federal funding for at-risk students is often used to supplement all-day funding. Most important, research studies confirm that attendance in full-day kindergarten results in academic and social benefits for students, at least in the primary grades. One study found that full-day kindergartners exhibited more independent learning, classroom involvement, productivity in work with peers, and reflectiveness than did half-day kindergartners. However, observers of trends in kindergarten scheduling argue that the issue underlying the value of kindergarten programs is that of creating developmentally appropriate learning environments for all kindergarten children, regardless of the length of the school day. Developmentally appropriate, child-centered, all-day programs: (1) integrate new learning with past experience through project work, mixed-ability grouping, and mixed-age grouping; (2) involve children in first-hand experience; (3) emphasize language development; (4) work with parents to share information about their children; (5) offer a balance of small group, large group, and individual activities; (6) assess students' progress through close teacher observation; and (7) develop children's social skills. Contains 13 references. (BC)

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Full-Day Kindergarten Programs

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Changes in American society and education over the last 20 years have contributed to the popularity of all-day (every day) kindergarten programs in many communities (Gullo, 1990). The increase in single parent and dual employment households, and the fact that most children spend a significant part of the day away from home, also signal significant changes in American family life compared to a generation ago. Studies show that parents favor a full-day program which reduces the number of transitions kindergartners experience in a typical day (Housden & Kam, 1992; Johnson, 1993). Research also suggests that many children benefit academically and socially during the primary years from participation in full-day, compared to half-day, kindergarten programs (Cryan et al., 1992).

Families who find it difficult to schedule both kindergarten and a child care program during the day are especially attracted to a full-day program (Housden & Kam, 1992). In many areas, both public and private preschool programs offer full-day kindergarten (Lofthouse, 1994). Still, some educators, policymakers, and parents prefer half-day, everyday kindergarten. They argue that a half-day program is less expensive and provides an adequate educational and social experience for young children while orienting them to school, especially if they have attended preschool. Many districts thus offer both half-day and full-day kindergarten programs when possible, but the trend is clearly in the direction of full-day kindergarten.

The Demographics of Full-Day Kindergarten

Well over 3.3 million children attend kindergarten in the United States, nearly as many children as attend first grade (Smith et al., 1994, p. 54). In 1993, about 54% of kindergarten teachers taught full-day classes, and about half of kindergartners attended full-day programs. Two-thirds of full-day kindergarten teachers taught in high-poverty areas, while fewer than one-third (29%) taught in schools with a low incidence of poverty (Heaviside et al., 1993). Teachers of classes with high minority enrollments were also more likely to teach full-day classes than were teachers of classes with low minority enrollments (67% versus 43%). State aid for all-day students is often used to fund full-day kindergarten. One reason for the high ratio of full-day to half-day kindergarten programs in high-poverty and high-minority schools is that state and federal funding for at-risk students is often used to supplement all-day funding, since all-day programs typically require extra classroom space, increased staffing for special services and programs, and additional classroom kinder-garten teachers (Fromberg, 1992; Housden & Kam, 1992).

Full-day kindergarten is also popular because it eliminates the need to provide buses and crossing guards at mid-day. A higher proportion of kindergarten teachers taught full-day classes in rural areas in 1993 (66%) than in city schools (59%), in towns (53%), or in schools in the urban "fringe" (39%) (Heaviside et al., 1993).

Research on the Effects of Full-Day Kindergarten

Research studies confirm that attendance in full-day kindergarten results in academic and social benefits for students, at least in the primary grades (Cryan et al., 1992; Karweit, 1992). Early studies seemed to offer little reliable evidence one way or the other because they used small samples or unique populations, failed to use rigorous standards, or concentrated almost exclusively on academic outcomes (as opposed to children's attitudes toward school, for example).

Cryan et al. (1992), however, are among the researchers who have found a broad range of effects, including a positive relationship between participation in full-day kindergarten and later school performance. After comparing similar half-day and full-day programs in a statewide longitudinal study, Cryan et al. found that full-day kindergartners exhibited more independent learning, classroom involvement, productivity in work with peers, and reflectiveness than half-day kindergartners. They were also more likely to approach the teacher and they expressed less withdrawal, anger, shyness, and blaming behavior than half-day kindergartners. In general, children in full-day programs exhibited more positive behaviors than did pupils in half-day or alternate-day programs.

Results similar to those of Cryan et al. have been found in other studies (Holmes and McConnell, 1990; Karweit, 1992). These positive effects and the academic gains in the first years of school support the value of developmentally appropriate full-day kindergarten.

Characteristics of Effective Full-Day Kindergarten Programs

Observers of trends in kindergarten scheduling argue that changing the *length* of the kindergarten day begs the

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underlying issue: creating developmentally and individually appropriate learning environments for *all* kindergarten children, regardless of the length of school day (Karweit, 1992; Katz, 1995).

Full-day kindergarten allows children and teachers time to explore topics in depth; reduces the ratio of transition time to class time; provides for greater continuity of day-to-day activities; and provides an environment that favors a child-centered, developmentally appropriate approach. Recent research indicates that, compared to children in didactic programs, children in child-centered kindergarten programs rated their abilities significantly higher, had higher expectations for success on academic tasks, and were less dependent on adults for permission and approval (Stipek et al., 1995).

Experts urge teachers, administrators, and parents to resist the temptation to provide full-day programs that are didactic rather than intellectually engaging in tone. Seat work, worksheets, and early instruction in reading or other academic subjects are largely inappropriate in kindergarten. By contrast, developmentally appropriate, child-centered all-day kindergarten programs:

- integrate new learning with past experiences through project work and through mixed-ability and mixed-age grouping (Drew & Law, 1990; Katz, 1995) in an unhurried setting;
- involve children in first-hand experience and informal interaction with objects, other children, and adults (Housden & Kam, 1992);
- emphasize language development and appropriate preliteracy experiences;
- work with parents to share information about their children, build understanding of parent and teacher roles, emphasize reading to children in school and at home, and set the stage for later parent-teacher partnerships;
- offer a balance of small group, large group, and individual activities (Katz, 1995);
- assess students' progress through close teacher observation and systematic collection and examination of students' work, often using portfolios; and
- develop children's social skills, including conflict resolution strategies.

Conclusion

Recent research supports the effectiveness of full-day kindergarten programs that are developmentally appropriate, indicating that they have academic and behavioral benefits for young children. In full-day programs, less hectic instruction geared to student needs and appropriate assessment of student progress contribute to the effectiveness of the program. While these can also be characteristics of high-quality half-day programs, many children seem to benefit, academically and behaviorally, from all-day kindergarten. Of course, the length of the school day is only one dimension of the kindergarten experience. Other important issues include the nature of the kindergarten curriculum and the quality of teaching.

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